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The CIA's worst problem

The Rockefeller commission which has been investigating alleged improprieties by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency is giving it pretty much a clean bill of health. Yes, says Vice-President Nelson Rockefeller, "there are things that have been done which are in contradiction to the statutes." But he adds that "in comparison to the total effort they are not major."

The phrase "not major" is the answer of the commission to the original charge by the New York Times that the CIA had engaged in "massive" illegal intrusion into the affairs of the American citizenry.

The commission report is not the end of the matter of the extent of CIA spying on private citizens. Committees of both Senate and House in Washington are conducting separate investigations. These may go on for months, or even years. Their findings may or may not in the end parallel the findings of the official Rockefeller commission which was made up largely by persons of official or former official capacity and hence perhaps inclined to leniency.

It is right and proper, of course, that charges of spying on private citizens be fully explored in order that remedial action may be taken if the investigations show that they are needed. But I would like to submit that these three investigations and anything which may emerge from them deal with a secondary, indeed almost peripheral, facet of the activities of the CIA and that they ignore entirely a more serious problem about the CIA.

The primary function of the CIA is not espionage, counterespionage or the conduct of subversion behind a real or potential enemy front line. Such activities can serve a national interest in small ways. But they are subordinate and secondary to the main purpose of any intelligence agency. The priority task of such an agency is to gather information, weigh and appraise such information, emerge with an objective appraisal of any particular world situation, and push such appraisals into the policymaking machinery of government. Unless CIA appraisals are sound, objective — and used in policymaking — the whole operation becomes a waste of time.

As a reporter I have watched the CIA from its original existence as the wartime Office of Strategic Services and through its permanent establishment as the CIA to the present. I have

known scores of CIA people personally. This includes four of its directors. I am entitled to say on the basis of such knowledge that it is an effective center for the collection and for the objective appraisal of information.

Also, throughout most of its history it was able to push its appraisals into the policy-making process.

But something went wrong during the Vietnam war.

A horrific version of what went wrong is contained in an article in the May issue of Harper's magazine. It is written by a Sam Adams who was engaged in enemy force estimates at CIA during that war. I have confirmed his bona fides. He says that at the time White House and Pentagon planning of war operations was based on an estimate of 270,000 enemy effectives. He concluded from his own research that the real figure should have been at least 200,000 higher. But he claims that his far higher estimate never broke through the White House resistance to unwelcome information.

Mr. Adams's higher estimates may or may not have been entirely sound. They appear to have been controversial inside the agency. But it is agreed by former officials of the agency that at the time it would have been impossible to push to the White House information which would have upset the premises of existing war planning. It is also alleged that as of today CIA estimates which disagree with Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's assumptions fail to get through from Langley to the White House.

If it is true that unwelcome CIA estimates cannot get through from the CIA itself to the policymaking process at the White House, then something serious and dangerous is happening. It would also follow that the whole CIA operation has become useless. It would mean that the President cannot obtain information before it has been warped by political considerations.

These are grave charges. In my mind they are more serious in their implications than those which the three formal groups have been exploring. I submit that they call for a prompt investigation. If found justified they would call for emergency blasting to reopen the channel of communications from Langley to the White House. Sound policies cannot be built on warped intelligence appraisals.

13
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